

Lesson Plan: The Reflexive Turn: Writing Culture and Against Culture¹

Monday, 25th of November, 100 minutes

Key Issues in Social and Cultural Anthropology

MA class, Department of Sociology and Social Anthropology, CEU

The course examines key theoretical concepts and approaches in past and contemporary anthropology, following two parallel paths. The first focuses on the history of the discipline, while the second examines key themes and debates in anthropology. This class deals with one of the key debates in social and cultural anthropology, the reflexive turn and the writing culture debate.

Expected Attendance: 28 students

Theme of this class session: The 'reflexive turn' in anthropology

The Writing Culture debates in the 1980s marks one of the most important shifts in anthropology in terms of both how anthropologists think about culture and, importantly, how they write about it. The class will explore the arguments in one of the foundational texts – Clifford's *Partial Truths* before moving on to Abu-Lughod's call for 'writing against culture'.

Key message/critical understandings we want students to achieve:

Main Goals:

- That students can exhibit a personalized, thoughtful, and coherent grasp of the arguments surrounding the writing culture debate

Students will understand that:

- Ethnographies are not objective, they are literary constructed accounts – they are fictions;
- Ethnographies are only ever partial – by telling one part of a story, anthropologists exclude another;
- Ethnographies are determined contextually, rhetorically, institutionally, generically, politically and historically;
- Culture has an “othering” effect that produces and maintains essentialisms. There are ways to write against culture.

Students will know that:

- The texts marked a turn in anthropology; they were highly important for the history of the discipline and for the subsequent development of anthropology.

Teaching objects:

The class is based on two mandatory texts and three additional readings.

Mandatory readings

Clifford, James. 1986. Introduction: Partial Truths. In: Clifford, James and Marcus, George E. (eds). *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Pp. 1-26. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Abu-Lughod, Lila. 1991. Writing against Culture. In: Fox, Richard (ed). *Recapturing Anthropology. Working in the Present*. Pp. 137-162. Santa Fe (New Mexico): School of American Research Press.

¹ Lesson plan developed in collaboration with Alexandra Oanca and Anna Sugiyama.

Additional Readings

Wolf, Eric. 1982. Introduction. In *Europe and the People Without History*. Pp. 3-23. University of California Press.

Narayan, Kirin. 1993. How Native is a “Native” Anthropologist? *American Anthropologist* 95: 671-686.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. 2002. Adieu, Culture: A New Duty Arises. In: Fox, Richard and King, Barbara (eds). *Anthropology beyond Culture*. Pp. 37-60. Oxford/N.Y: Berg.

Pre-session preparation:

As part of the pre-session preparation, the students are required to read the mandatory texts and to post via the university e-learning site a substantive 'discussion question' on the reading material for potential use in class discussion. The questions need to be submitted to all participating students by 5 p.m. Sunday.

Demonstrations of understanding and types of evidence:

- The e-learning discussion (informal checks for understanding/ongoing assessments used as part of the instructional process);
- The participation of the students in the argument mapping exercise (informal checks for understanding and academic prompts/open ended questions);
- The participation of the students in the discussions (informal checks for understanding and academic prompts/open ended questions).

Learning activities and timings:

Time (min)	Description of the activity	Tools, equipment
5 min 11:05	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none">- A two sentence summary of the argument;- Why writing culture is important;- A guide to the lesson ahead.	
20 min 11:25	Lecture <p>The lecture will take seriously the call by the authors of the main text to take writing seriously, by taking the text seriously and examining – argument by argument – the text in a linear fashion. It will then move on to the 2nd reading and give a short summary of the main points – especially the call for 'ethnographies of the particular'.</p>	Power-point Whiteboard

<p>30 min</p> <p>11:55</p>	<p>Documentary: Into the Field Directed by Alyssa Grossman, 28 minutes</p> <p>This film examines the everyday secular lives of nuns residing in the Romanian Orthodox monastery of Văratec. By visually exploring the social aesthetics of the monastery, the film depicts certain aspects of the nuns' everyday, lived experiences. Instead of exclusively focusing on the spiritual qualities of monastery existence, it documents the secular aspects of the nuns' relationships, activities, and routines, and offers a glimpse into the concrete ways in which they negotiate their identities within the separate yet connected spaces of home and church.</p> <p><i>The film incorporates brief sequences of stop-motion animation, demonstrating some of the trials and tribulations that anthropologists sometimes encounter during filming and fieldwork. Intended as a reflexive meta-commentary, these passages point to some of the unpredictable and often uncontrollable processes of ethnographic investigation.</i></p>	<p>Computer</p> <p>Projector</p> <p>Sound System</p>
<p>25 min</p> <p>12:20</p>	<p>Argument Mapping (whole class)</p> <p>The arguments of the two main texts will be mapped (first Partial Truths). (note: following Davies (2010), “concept mapping allows students to understand the relationships between concepts”, while argument mapping allows students to display “connections between propositions and contentions, and to evaluate them in terms of validity of argument structure and the soundness of argument premises” (p.280))</p> <p>The argument mapping will start from two concepts written by the instructor on the board “partial truth” and “culture” and be led with the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - According to the Clifford text, what is a partial truth? Why Clifford says ethnography is a partial truth? - According to the text, what is culture? Or writing culture? - What characteristics culture/writing culture has according to the text? <p><i>One student to volunteer will take notes using mind-mapping software and in produce an electronic version of the activity.</i></p>	<p>Whiteboard</p> <p>Computer</p> <p>Mapping Software</p>
<p>15 min</p>	<p>Discussions and Questions (whole class)</p> <p>The questions will be connected with the argument mapping exercise and will be based on the issues we want the students to deeply understand as a result of the class. Students are free to raise their own questions at this point. If students have no questions the instructor will ask:</p>	

12:35	<p>1. Shall we keep the term 'culture'? How do you “write culture”?</p> <p>2. What are the features and limitations of ethnographies?</p> <p>3. Is it possible to write against culture?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - what's 'wrong' with generalization? - is an ethnography of the particular a useful writing tool? 	Whiteboard
5 min End at 12:40	<p>Close the class and draw conclusions</p> <p>Draw conclusions on the discussions and summarize the main points we want the students to deeply understand as a result of the class:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Ethnographies are not objective, they are literary constructed accounts – they are fictions. – Ethnographies are only ever partial – by telling part of one story anthropologists exclude another. – Ethnographies are determined contextually, rhetorically, institutionally, generically, politically and historically – Culture has an “othering” effect that produced and maintains essentialisms. There are ways to write against culture through the ethnography of the particular. 	

Bottlenecks/anticipated problems in student learning:

- Modest experience in participating in group-level discussions;
- Modest experience in participating in argument mapping;
- Discussions were not encouraged in previous classes since the course is mostly lecture-based; for this reason, students might be reserved when participating in group-level discussions and in the argument mapping exercise;
- Some students could be monopolise discussions.